

1-1-1998

Editors' Notes

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Recommended Citation

Love, Stuart; Love, D'Esta; and White, Donald W. (1998) "Editors' Notes," *Leaven*: Vol. 6: Iss. 4, Article 2.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol6/iss4/2>

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Editors' Notes

Stuart and D'Esta Love

This issue of *Leaven* takes seriously the ministry of small churches. As with all ministry that emanates from congregations of God's people, it is a given that small churches and their devoted ministers are earthen vessels through which the transcendent power of God is at work and made known (2 Cor 4:7). We have asked **DONALD W. WHITE**, minister of a small church in Lakeview, Oregon, to serve as guest editor for this issue. Rarely has a guest editor taken his topic and task so seriously and with such devotion. For months Don has worked with ideas and writers in the formulation of this issue. We are grateful for the final result. We commend it to all of our readers and to the cause of Christ among churches of the Stone-Campbell tradition. May the rich ministry of small churches be lifted up!

D'ESTA AND STUART LOVE

Issue Editor's Introduction

Stepping into a college bookstore, I scanned by instinct for the section labeled "church growth." Almost immediately my eyes fell on a new book: *The Madison Story*. According to the subtitle, it contained "90 Successful Church Growth Programs of the Madison Church of Christ." I had heard that the Madison church, in the Nashville Metro area, was the largest among Churches of Christ worldwide. Surely, I thought, they would know the magic formula for success. The longer I gazed at the book, the more the words "successful" and "growth" seemed to glow. Ira North, Madison's longtime preacher, was smiling at me from the cover, beckoning me near.

All the ministers I know in small churches are just as eager for any information that holds out the hope of success. The problem is that so many books define success in ministry in terms all too tangible, with big-church goals and methods that leave the small church under the table picking through the scraps for something it can use.

There are few books on small-church ministry, and those that exist are usually difficult to find. The irony is that most churches are small churches. So why are there so few resources specifically for small-church leaders? I have a feeling that most authors of practical theology are members of larger churches near major seminaries in urban or suburban areas. Or perhaps publishing houses believe that those who have the obvious signs of "success" are those who have the most to say about ministry. Or maybe book sellers have learned that the small-church leader tends to steer clear of books that deal realistically with small-church issues, opting instead to purchase material that offers pie-in-the-sky hopes of megachurch success for a small-town church of twenty retirees.

Whatever the reason for the lack of readily available material on ministry in small churches, this issue of *Leaven* is intended to help fill that gap. It is intentionally weighted toward practical

matters, yet every article assumes that God is present in the small church, doing his work of changing people and forming a spiritual community. Those I have asked to contribute to this issue are church leaders who have proven their love for the small church through years of service, and most are currently working in that context.

DEAN PETTY reflects on years of ministry with smaller groups in Oregon and eastern Europe to share essential skills he has identified for the church worker in the small-church context. In view of the many differences among small churches, Petty admits that “there is no set of skills that guarantees success.” However, his five foundational principles for ministry do much to point the way toward effective work in small churches. Characteristic of Petty’s nature and priorities, his list both begins and ends with relationship.

The downside of ministry in smaller churches comes readily to mind for anyone who has worked in them, but **LES BENNETT**, **ROGER MASSEY**, **DEBBIE PERRY**, and **MIKE SUBLETT** all contribute to an article on the positive aspects. We get to hear of the blessings of such work from a variety of voices in locations that range from California to Budapest, Hungary. All of them display a sincere joy and gratitude for the ministry in which God has placed them.

SILAS SHOTWELL candidly shares some of the innermost, hidden thoughts that are inevitable among ministers. His frankness about jealousy in ministry may make some uncomfortable, but it is just the kind of honesty that is necessary for dealing with what he identifies as the subtle snake that has its coils around far too many. One of the greatest weapons we have against the serpent of ministerial jealousy is what Shotwell shows us here—open confrontation.

With the recent emphasis on creativity and excellence in worship, small churches can feel left out because of their fewer resources and far smaller pool of talent. Yet **DENNIS CONNER** outlines what the Yadkinville church has done to gain a greater sense of God’s presence through their “renewed commitment to worship excellence.”

“What programs do you have for my children?” That is usually the first question on the lips of young parents as they initially step into a church, and it is an intimidating question for a church that has few children to begin with and few resources for creating a sparkling children’s program. **GEORGIA HENNEY** shows us that the larger church may not be the best model for our children’s teaching program and that our creativity and unique flexibility in the small church can be one of our greatest assets for teaching and cherishing those children who come our way.

I am grateful to **ELEANOR DANIEL** for editing our resource section, which includes a resource article by **DAN YARNELL**. A small-church consultant in Britain for several years, Yarnell has recently coauthored a book on small-church ministry especially for churches in the United Kingdom and is well acquainted with the most helpful literature.

It should be a comfort to small churches that we need look no farther than the New Testament to find appropriate models for our ministry and fellowship. **ROB MCRAY** examines the house church phenomenon of the first century to provide a suitable theological foundation for today’s small church. McRay points out that too many small churches get caught up in our culture’s tendency “to assume that bigger is better” at the cost of neglecting their own strengths. He also tells us that the small church is not only normative but may be the best expression of the life of community that we see in the early church.

One of the struggles of ministry in the small church is maintaining a sense of significance in one’s work. I am grateful to **LARRY COPELAND**, who allowed me to interview him about his ministry for my article. Even more, I am thankful for the vital work he had with the Cottonwood church, a work that demonstrates that significance has nothing to do with size or numbers. His is an example of unselfish service despite the challenging circumstances of his ministry.

PAUL CLARK understands how challenging evangelism is for the small church. In smaller churches, evangelism cannot rely upon a program, a building, or cutting-edge market research. However helpful those may be, Clark shows that evangelism in the small church must depend far more on long-term personal relationships and the chance encounters that God arranges in our daily lives.

There is a certain kind of warmth and fellowship that is found only in small churches. **ROYCE MONEY** shares his appreciation for that “something special” within the small congregation—a place where one’s unique gifts can “really shine,” and where younger Christians usually have stronger relationships with older ones. A communion meditation is provided by **PHIL E. PHILLIPS**. **MORRIS YATES** asks

us to dream about what we would want our home congregations to be and look like. Finally, **RONALD L. TYLER** reviews twelve classic books on preaching.

I am very grateful to Stuart and D’Esta Love for all their help and strong support in this project. I wish to dedicate this issue to those who have been significant mentors and ministers to me—Tom Bonner and Russ Dudley and, especially, the small church in Lakeview, Oregon, that has allowed me the joy and privilege of being their minister. Though this issue of *Leaven* has much to offer the reader who is concerned with church work in any size congregation, I pray that it will be of special help and encouragement to those who work within smaller churches.

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